

## Translation Errors of Public Signs in English Subtitle: Residents' Poor Foreign Language Level of China

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**ABSTRACT:** *China is in an Age of Economy Thriving and Technology Advancing. This strike increasing international visitors. In the foreigners, very few of them are able to communicate in Chinese, which means that it is significant to provide accurate information to the foreign friends by their understandable codes. For instance, in a hotel, a foreigner needs to know which way to go for their daily activities without enquiring at the reception desk. These requirements are served by public signs, e.g. the location of a canteen. Actually, this service is a challenge of Chinese people's English level. In recent years, as a lack of contextually linguistic and cultural knowledge, there are some errors of translation on public English signs, resulting in some inconvenience to the oversea travelers. This paper will analyses these problems in root and then advance prospective resolutions.*

**KEY WORDS:** Translation Error; Grammar; Spelling; One Word with Various Meanings

### I. INTRODUCTION

Signs in an internationally spread language is playing a crucial role in public spaces in present-day China. Correct and exact information in the language provides much convenience for foreign residents' international trip, especially for those who are not capable to speak Chinese. In an airport, for example, a panel of indication in standards English helps foreign visitors to find which way to go, efficiently approaching their target places. However, for the influence of mother language, a Chinese person is hard to grasps English as professional as a native speaker. This is a broadly occurred phenomenon in a foreign language learning. Consequently, some mistakes occur in translation of English public signs, leading to some misunderstanding. This is a seriously strict problem instead of something humor. A warning board saying “小心地滑”is translated into “carefully slip”, rather than “take care for the wet floor”. Problems like this can widely be seen in many high-density person areas, such as couch stations, shopping streets, and landmarks, negatively affecting foreigners' touring activities. There is necessity to find the causing reasons and to resolve them.

### II. METHODOLOGY

Generally, public signs could be divided into four types according to functions, which could roughly be indicators, warning words, way codes, and names. This paper will find some physical examples of wrong translations, to analyses and discuss possible causes of their mistakes.

- Indicators



Fig 1



Fig 2



Fig 3

Indicators are functional as a guidance for people's behaviors. In an indoor space, dwellers need to know the approaches to the canteens, the conference rooms, the halls, the emergency exit etc. They are important for guests' mission efficiency and security. Frequently seen general indicators includes Food & Beverage (餐饮部), Business Center (商务中心), Manager (经理) etc. Apart from basic daily activities, individuals have to find where to escape when something urgent happens, such as an earthquake. Without the enlightenment of these words, guests will be confused by the work program of their dwelling places, a misleading usually guide a situation worse. In Fig 1, the word 出口 is translated into export, the meaning of a word for international trading, rather than an open of getting out. Meanwhile, a bathroom for 残疾人 in Fig 2 is translated into deformed, instead of the disable. Fig 3 shows a mistake for poor-level learners who cannot spell a word correctly, no foreign person could understand what is that room utilised as. Errors in the three images totally change the meaning of original environment, which will result in some puzzlements.

- **Warning Words**



Fig 4



Fig 5

Warning words usually tell visitors what they should do and what they cannot. It is mainly functional in object protection or keeping people's security. For instance, in a historic heritage, the precious items are too weak to touch, so visitors must be told not to touch or move them. By contrast, in somewhere with safety hazards, travelers will be told to be careful for something. Here are some instances of this type, including NO LITTERING (请勿乱扔垃圾),

PROTECT AGAINST HEAT (怕热), BEWARE OBSTRUCTION(小心障碍), etc. It is clearly exhibited in Fig 4, there is an obvious grammar mistake on the notice words of security. It originally notices the tourists be careful for the dangers on the bank, for avoiding falling down. Yet it actually presents a meaning of order, asking the visitors to fall into the water carefully.

- Way Codes



Fig 6

Way codes always play a role in exhibiting regional traffic rules and direction guidance. They are useful in people's travelling actions, including walking, cycling, and driving. With the directing of these codes, pedestrians and drivers could be on the right way following relevant regulations correctly. On expressways, words such as

DETOUR(绕行), DON'T DRIVE WHEN TIRED(严禁疲劳驾驶), FASTEN YOUR SEAT BELT(系好安全带) etc, are often seen. The direction board in Fig 6 translates the names of two cities wrongly. It translates the words into their other meanings. A foreign driver will not know the aim of the two roads when seeing it.

- Names



Fig 7



Fig 8

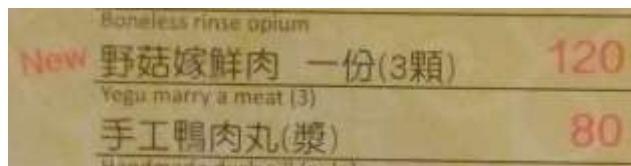


Fig 9

Names, or titles, often emerge at the entrance of some places, such as buildings and landscapes. Names are summaries of object features, including geographical cultures, physical functions, and suiting groups. It also includes commodity names. The title of a restaurant, in Fig 7, 水饺馆, is translated into museum. Obviously, the translator does not correctly understand the meaning of ‘馆’ here. It means somewhere for meals. Besides, in Fig 8, the title of the wearing shop, ‘名裤城’ is translated into ‘Name Pants City’. ‘名’ means name or being famous in Chinese. Finally, in Fig 9, a foreigner cannot understand the resources of this food, ‘野菇嫁鲜肉’, when seeing the menu, for he does not think meat can get marry. It causes some troubles in communication.

### III. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Last section has exhibited some practical examples of mistaken translation in public signs. They show the weak spread and poor quality of English in China. While creating some jokes, it results in much trouble. Through deeply analyzing, it is not hard to conclude the types of problems as follows:

**Grammar:** Grammar is a difficulty in English learning, and also other foreign languages. Each language has its own grammar regulations, which includes properties of words, structures of sentences, certainly matchings among words and expressions. A learner without a clear understanding in grammar is not able to communicate

in the language systematically, especially in reading and writing. To some extent, translating is a form of writing, for short and simple sentences only. The translator in Fig 4 does not understand the function of the warning words. An exact meaning of this notices roughly includes two parts, an order and a possible consequence. In that cause, a correct description of its meaning has two parts, be careful and you are possible to fall into the water. What needs to be shown is ‘Take Care for the Water, or You Might Fall Down’.

**Spelling:** Spelling errors of words is a problem for most primary learners. Words are the cells of English, supporting the smoothly running of the whole language system. In most situations, spelling of words in closely link with memory, remembering correctly or incorrectly, an incorrect memory leads to a wrong spelling. But in fact, there are some regulations in word spellings. One is the pronunciation rules, such as the ‘u’ against ‘oo’ or ‘u’. Another is the root of words. For instance, some adjectives could be switched into nouns when being ended by ‘ness’ additionally. Deeply holding the two codes can considerably simplify the task of word memorizing. As to the mistake in Fig 3, a translator would not have such a mistake if being able to read the word, smoking, correctly.

**Various Meanings of One Word:** A misunderstanding in various-meaning words is the most important problem in all kinds of translation errors. Most Chinese letters have more than one meaning, so does English. Factually, in the error examples shown in last section, misuses take a huge proportion. The translator in Fig 7 could work rightly if he has studied more meanings of the word ‘馆’. It means a gallery, a museum, or a restaurant in Chinese. In an environment relating to food, it should be translated into restaurant or canteen, rather than museum. A same humor affair happens in Fig 8 as well. In this environment, the word ‘名’ obviously refers something that is well-known. In Fig 9, ‘野菇嫁鲜肉’ means mushrooms are in some fresh meat, which is a mixture of two foods. A clear and short expression is ‘Mixing Wild Mushrooms with Fresh Meat’.



Fig 10

**Others:** There are also other type of problems in addition to the kinds of mistakes mentioned above. Fig 10 is obviously translated by someone does not have any English knowledge who only copy the expressions formed on a website. Unbelievably, a similar problem even occurs in some formal translation companies, which is illustrated in Fig 11. The translation person of Tuo Wen Translation Company translates ‘钢笔画’ into ‘pen drawing’ based on their translation tool. In fact, in art area, drawings without color mostly mean ‘素描’, no matter what is used to draw. They should be translated into ‘line drawings’ more exactly. The result provided by this company is incorrect. A lack of professional contextual knowledge in one special field might not be a shy, but it is really funny that a licensed translation company relies on some unprofessionally poor instrument to implement their works. For avoiding problems like this, carefulness in work is must. All work processes and results that will be presented to the public have to be checked a couple of times.



The Fig 11

It is clear that translating public signs is a huge trivial project that involves a wide spectrum aspects of domestic life. It needs a great amount of efforts of translation persons. An exactly correct translation is a long way, instead of an overnight process. In this field, both rich language training and cultural understanding are important (Ma Qiannan 2012). Moreover, the effect of culture cannot be neglected. Actually, a mistake of grammar also results from the difference of culture. ‘a culture-specific phenomenon is one that is found to exist

in a particular form or function in only one of the two cultures being compared. Translating means a kind of cultural comparison. As a translator he or she has to explain the cultural phenomenon in the source language with the cultural knowledge in his or her own culture.' (Nord, 2001)

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

Through data collection and analysis, a variety kinds of translation errors and their reasons have been found, which advances the ways for resolving. Public signs are tools that improve the communication between hosts and oversea guests. But they have become a simple change between the two languages, rather than a cultural exchange. It not only influences foreigners' activities, but also declines the international appearance of China. (Jing Ma 2014) These phenomena exhibit a reality that citizens in China pay too little attention in English study. It is the rooted issue which should be addressed effectively. The significance of English study is doubtless. English is always a compulsory subject in all levels of education in China. All students spend a certain amount of time for studying it but very few of them are aware about the importance of the study. Many of them focus on acquiring good marks in exams. In middle schools, students who gain high scores have more opportunities to be accepted by better universities. With a thought like this, English has been a path of degree progression for some students, rather than a skill for their career development. As a result, they are learning English passively, which leads to a result that graduates are not able to use it skillfully in a practical society. It is clear that translation mistakes exhibited in this essay provide wrong information to foreign visitors. To combat them, comprehensively improving English level of residents is vital. English learners, no matter what their purposes of study are, have to be given opportunities of using it practically, even in an early stage. When teaching any new grammars and words, teachers should release some relevantly practical task for practicing, such as assignments of public sign translation, instead of answering questions in tests only. This method can result in a whole improvement of their language levels in grammar, spelling, and different meanings of each word.

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